

[By Mounira Al Hmoud](#)

Citing the potential impact on dairy farmers, Rep. Peter Welch, a Democrat, has teamed up with a Republican colleague from the nation's heartland to push for a vote on legislation reauthorizing the nation's farm programs before the current "farm bill" expires at the end of this month.

In the wake of Senate passage of a five-year farm bill reauthorization earlier this summer, Welch has joined with Rep. Kristi Noem, a Republican from South Dakota, in seeking a farm bill vote in the Republican-controlled House. But House GOP leaders have so far resisted bringing the measure to the floor, in part because a number of their members are pushing for even greater cuts than those approved earlier this year by the House Agriculture Committee.

"The worst outcome would be to have no vote at all," Welch said of the farm bill. "We need to do our work so that farmers can do theirs."

With barely two weeks until the Sept. 30 expiration of the Milk Income Loss Contract, or MILC, on Sept. 30, Welch said voting on the farm bill is urgent, especially for Vermont. The MILC is considered by its advocates to be a safety net for dairy farmers in Vermont and elsewhere, providing them with security when milk prices drop or costs associated with dairy farming increase.

"The total amount of MILC payment to Vermont through June was \$7.4 million and (it) was very helpful to Vermont farmers to be able to purchase needed fertilizer and seeds in the spring and feed during the summer," said Diane Bothfield, deputy secretary of Vermont's Agency of Agriculture, Foods and Markets.

According to a 2011 report from the New England office of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Vermont had 134,000 milk cows and produced a total of 2.538 million pounds of milk.

Bothfield added that, in addition to the MILC program, there are other provisions in the farm bill that benefit Vermont farmers — such as programs involving conservation, growth of organic foods, and promotion of farmers markets.

Vermont Sen. Patrick Leahy, a Democrat and a former chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, noted that the Senate passed a bipartisan farm bill months ago, and that House leaders have no good excuse for blocking it.

"Dairy farmers may take the first hit, which is why I am pushing so hard to extend the MILC program," Leahy said. "In the meantime, programs like (the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) and conservation may be able to continue, but only for a while."

SNAP, the current name for what was formerly known as the food stamps program, has also complicated passage of the farm bill in the House — as many Democrats oppose the more than \$16 billion in food stamp cuts contained in the bill that passed out of committee.

Marissa Parisi, executive director of Hunger Free Vermont, an advocacy group, said tens of thousands of Vermonters would be affected if the House version of the bill and its food stamp cuts were enacted

According to Parisi, the Senate version of the bill would have a lesser impact on the Vermont food stamp program, but would still reduce monthly aid by about \$90 per person.

"Over 97,000 people in Vermont, or one in six, are in this program," said Parisi. "Seniors and person with disabilities are the ones who would be the most impacted."